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LIVING WITH STRANGERS

In this collection of poetry I have attempted to deal with the problem of human loneliness and alienation as experienced by a number of characters who might be best described as outcasts, existing as disoriented aliens in unfamiliar landscapes: living among strangers. The theme of exile and the plight of the unreconciled outsider is the prevailing motif throughout the collection, hopefully tying it together as a whole. In these poems I have tried to explore what I consider one of the most basic traumas of the human experience.

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**LIVING WITH STRANGERS**

By

**Arlene Diane Katz**

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
1974

Approved by:

Fred Chappell  
Thesis Adviser

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Two years is a long time for meeting people  
and coming to be grateful for their friendship

This thesis has been approved by the following  
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

initiative group of my often obscure subject matter.

Also, I wish to express my thanks to Arthur  
Dixon for maintaining his sense of humor long after  
I had abandoned mine; and to Tom Kirby-Smith who  
was always helpful, whatever my problem.

Finally, I wish to thank all the people who  
have been my friends, for seeing me through

Thesis Adviser

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Two years is a long time for meeting people and coming to be grateful for their friendship and assistance.

I am particularly indebted to Fred Chappell for his interest in my poetry and his superb intuitive grasp of my often obscure subject matter.

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## THE FIRST CROSSING

First he says

"Here, take this--

This is for your journey

Though you may not open it."

It isn't daylight

And I'm afraid.

I ask: "Where is

He says:

"You take the road that leads west,

Easy,

The sun travels that way."

He smiles.

I say: "But it is night

I can't see anything at all."

I say: "Where is my mother?"

He says:

"Put this inside your pocket

And this around your head."

He teaches me three words to say

For times when I'm alone and cold:

Three words to eat instead of food

Or drink instead of water

Or breathe instead of air.

"What about crocodons in the dark?"

I say,

"Or dragons in the forest?

Or wickedly bright swaying in the wind."

"I have nothing more to say to you."

He says,

"It's time."

"But it isn't light"

I say,

"It isn't fair,

I'd rather sleep and stay.

It isn't right.

There are a thousand answers

You should give

Before I'm sent away,

It isn't right.

It's dark.

Some roads lead nowhere

Some over cliffs.

It isn't fair to grieve my mother

To make me leave at night alone.

She doesn't know.

I say: "Where is my mother?"

It isn't fair."

## CHILDRENS VOICES



## THE FIRST CROSSING

First he says  
"Here, take this--  
This is for your journey  
Though you may not open it."

It isn't daylight  
And I'm afraid.  
I ask: "Where is my mother?"  
He says:  
"You take the road that leads west,  
Easy.  
The sun travels that way."  
He smiles.  
I say: "But it is night  
I can't see anything at all."  
I say: "Where is my mother?"

He says:  
"Put this inside your pocket  
And this around your head."  
He teaches me three words to say  
For times when I'm alone and cold.  
Three words to eat instead of food  
Or drink instead of water  
Or breathe instead of air.

"What about crossroads in the dark?"  
I say,  
"Or dragons in the forest,  
Or rickety bridges swaying in the wind."

"I have nothing more to say to you."  
He says,  
"It's time."  
"But it isn't light"  
I say,  
"It isn't fair,  
I'd rather sleep and stay.  
It isn't right.  
There are a thousand answers  
You should give  
Before I'm sent away,  
It isn't right.  
It's dark.  
Some roads lead nowhere  
Some over cliffs.  
It isn't fair to grieve my mother  
To make me leave at night alone.  
She doesn't know.  
I say: "Where is my mother?  
It isn't fair."

## CHILD OF THE DARK HALLWAYS

It's the passage to the left of the dining room,  
Shadows shift and glitter under Grandpa's wardrobe.  
I have seen eyes watching in the gloom.

They say they know my name. The family  
Doesn't know. They sit at supper passing  
Plates. They portion broccoli

Before I may eat dessert. They give my sister  
More than they give me. Emily wears my mother's face.  
She is older and stitches samplers in the parlor.

I watch the yard unravel outside the house, where trees  
Creak and shatter into pieces. In the afternoon you can find  
Dead robins folded under bushes. Emily

Suns in the garden but doesn't see  
How weeds creep among our violets like the disease  
That stretched apart Aunt Lily. It strangled her,  
It will not go for me

I know the secret formula. At night I turn six times before  
I go to bed. I keep a feather under the pillow and I never tell.  
I always take three breaths and chant a witch's prayer before

I pass the hallway. I know the magic spell.  
They will take all the others before they come for me.

I shall live alone and bolt the kitchen door.  
I shall hang chimes, chalk pentacles upon the floor.

They will not come for me.

## THE CAULDRON

Of course my sister knows.

I don't know anything at all.

Because she is older, she says

She knows better.

She says we must be:

Careful.

Or something might happen.

Like elevators falling down the shaft.

That might happen.

We'd be flattened like squirrels on the highway.

Or we might be kidnapped,

So we mustn't talk to grown-ups we don't know.

They might give us ice cream and then

Slit our throats like Bluebeard.

Or there might be an earthquake.

Or a fire in the apartment, we'd be trapped.

There's not much we can do about that, she says

We'd be burnt like the Saints.

Or a tidal wave so big it can knock a city down

We'd be drowned, even on the eighteenth floor.

Nothing could save us.

Nothing could save anyone.

Not even the Church.

Not even if you are good as gold.

I'm not as good as that but

God doesn't care anyway - Kristina says

He doesn't care that you're good anymore than  
Santa Claus.

It's all lies.

And he won't do a thing:

Not for earthquakes,

Or cancer,

Or being caught in the dark by the devil.

Kristina says he looks down

And doesn't bother.

She says Father McBidey lies too

I'd think it was very bad,

Except she says it's true

And I believe her.

She can make spells.

She can make a teacher trip and fall

Or forget to collect assignments.

She says she'll teach me how.

How she made Amy lose her coral ring

When she didn't invite us to her party.

And Sister Elizabeth died in a car crash going home

After she made Kristina stay late after school

For a week.

"It's punishment for punishment"

Kristina says:

It's the cold black rule.

She takes care of me, she says

She'll teach me everything she knows

Even the death spells

(When I'm older)

She says you can make the dead walk

And the living do what you tell them to

By magic

The world turns upside down like a ferris wheel

By magic

And I believe her.

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## THE NURSERY

Daddy says to comb my hair  
But Daddy doesn't know.  
He says I should be pretty when he comes home  
But Mommy doesn't care at all.  
Most times she sleeps till afternoon.  
I watch the shows and eat chocolate cake.  
Or walk barefoot on the carpet, or watch  
The people rush about downstairs like bugs.  
Sometimes I go to school (not much)  
I'd rather stay at home and watch T.V.  
While Mommy sleeps and sleeps  
Or takes her pills.

When I go to school Miss Newman shakes her head  
And asks if I have enough to eat or  
Do I want an extra glass of milk?  
At home I have a whole refrigerator.  
When it's full there's plenty.  
When it's not I go downstairs to the fruitstand  
Where they leave the fruit outside.  
Daddy works late at the office  
Or doesn't come home at all.  
Mommy doesn't care, when her  
Friend Celia comes they sit



And laugh and laugh.

She calls him: Bastard.

(Once I listened behind the sofa)

Celia smiles when she looks at me

She says I look like "Him."

I asked, was I a bastard too.

I asked Miss Newman and she looked sad

And held me against her chest.

(I was embarrassed)

I like staying home best - I watch the shows.

I like to turn the volume down and see the people

Speak. When they talk I imagine their mouths

Saying bastard to each other.



## MARELLA ON THE FERRIS WHEEL

Swinging down slow motion  
Then rising round the spinning hub  
To smoky clouds stalled above the wheel.  
Beneath me voices whisper,  
Sounds from underwater:  
Like whales singing  
Like currents pulling shells toward shore.  
I ride past flashing reefs  
Where people flinch and glide like minnows  
Down where colors pulse against each other  
Or drown in darkness.

I swim upwards past cotton candy eaters  
The dark women selling fortunes--  
Past the tilting carousel.  
I see Marcus and Lucy locked together on the death-  
Defying train.  
Coasting down hills so steep you think you're falling.  
I hear them call as they clutch the flying bar.  
I hold nothing.  
Plummeting down so hard lungs fold like wings  
And colors roll together without sound.  
Whirling with the rounding wheel  
I rise like a phoenix, each time I fall.

## CIRCLE OF WHITE STONES

It is a circle of white stones

My father has gone to China

It is the elm creaking outside the window

A half-moon rising in tangled bones

Strangers gathered outside the door like pigeons circling

He never said he'd stay

Like birds scratching and quarreling in the living room

They come and then they go away

I walk between their conversations; they never see

Invisible, I make no sound

They talk at me as if I didn't know

I'm not fooled

Stone piled on stone

And a hole cut thru the world to China.

THE MANDA POEMS

THE MANDA POEMS

Highly he shifts against me,  
The walls along the bed.  
Gallies the narrow pass to the ceiling.  
It was I who knew how I cry out  
But I know not people as--as I think to do I  
And about for me most guilty and in the living room he touch him.  
I am the engineer, people you know as I  
Let me tell you (many people) that  
"Look, look, look."  
Here is a little girl dressed in a red  
Here is a little girl about your ankles.  
And a little girl who is lying on the floor  
Shattered to pieces in the night.  
He makes me feel in the morning  
By my little on the way and  
The lamp drops between the bedpost and the board.  
He says that he needs me  
That I will not be the shopping.  
I don't like the stairs to the street.  
I do not like the hallway or  
The German lady on the first landing always peering out at me.  
He doesn't care that I don't wash  
(The water smells of city pipes)

## MANDA DREAMS OF HER SISTER

Nightly he shifts against me,  
The walls creak along the bed.  
Shadows of traffic race across the ceiling.  
It may be that he hears how I cry out  
But I do not think so--he sleeps too soundly.  
Even the cats' disputes in the living room do not touch him.  
I am an uneasy sleeper, dreaming often of my  
Sister (dead sixteen years) who is telling me to:  
"Look, look Manda,  
Here is a leopard frog belly-up in the fountain.  
Here is a king snake so tame he winds about your ankles.  
And a jay lying on the path  
Shattered to pieces in last night's storm."

He makes me breakfast in the morning  
My cup rattles on the tray and  
The lemon drops between the bedpost and the board.  
He says that he doesn't mind  
That I will not do the shopping.  
I don't like the stairs to the street,  
I do not like the hallway or  
The German lady on the first landing always peering out at me.  
He doesn't care that I don't wash  
(The water smells of city pipes)

Or that the cats run wild out onto the fire escape.  
He filters from one room to another smiling and  
Touching the window glass. I count his face mirrored  
Seven times. He says it won't be long before  
This all is past.

Every night I am racing my sister to the gazebo or  
Pulling lilies limp and fleshy from the pond.  
Every night I see Angela's face before mine, bare  
And decomposed.

Every morning there is marmalade and him speaking:  
Sometimes of treasure hidden by the sea,  
Of clipper ships caught by reefs like jewels in filigree.  
Sweet coral and my sister calling from the depths.  
He smiles and his teeth are gold and silver filed smooth.  
His left eye, emerald.

## MANDA, THE TELEPHONE AND RAIN

I will not listen.

It rings like a voice calling my name

When I do not want to hear--persistent

As a nightmare trailing us all morning

Crying: "Answer me!"

Shouting after you when you do not want to come.

Rain brushes at the windows.

Across the way pigeons droop among fire-escapes

Shifting feet and shivering in the dusky light.

I mark the hours circling dimming rooms while

The telephone scratches at the door

Whining like a chipped record, or a hoarse alarm.

The sound makes the kittens wild, they jump and claw.

It's ghosts I'd tell them, making you listen

When you can't see.

Like Angela, my sister, in a dream.

Last night I watched her drowning.

## LUCIEN

In dreams I find him stirring coffee in the kitchen  
Or feeding the cats mackerel from the old Swede's market  
Watching from the window I see how he picks out fish  
Asking what is fresh from the sea and for fisherman's news.  
He stands anchored to the door for hours  
Fingers intertwined and locked, smiling invisibly.  
While shadows race the afternoons away  
And seasons shift the grimy sky around  
Revolve to warmer evenings when  
I sit out on the fire-escape  
Hearing pigeons coo and call three names:  
Angela, Lucien and mine.

He likes gulls best, but they never stay  
Always heading back toward sea.  
Circling inland when the weather turns.  
We feed them but they disappear for days.  
I worry I may be left alone although  
He laughs and holds a hand out, bright and sharp as glass.  
Manda, Angela, Lucien, all three  
We watch the seasons dip and rise above our heads  
Like giant wings.  
I can't remember when it was he first arrived  
He came as soft as seaweed rocking underwater.



Standing motionless, smiling without sound.

His eyes, two feathers of darkness

Following me in great

Circles.

Later, in our room we'd sing and watch  
The moon rise, calm as a lady's smile.  
Forbidding me that as shadows grew we gazed  
Was a foreign queen.  
(She looked at me with eyes like broken birds.)  
Two eyes I'd had that night as blue as  
Like her.

I told Angela once  
We'd run away forever.  
We'd live all our lives  
Weaving Queen Anne's lace to wear;



## THE FINAL SUMMER OF THE BIRDS

Before my sister died  
We used to run away,  
Past the spindly orchard and the empty robin's nests  
Down where the river crooked  
Like an elbow.  
Angela was afraid to cross the narrow places  
With the mossy stones so slippery  
And Aunt Laura punished me, the elder,  
Saying: "You'll have her drowned before you're through.  
No supper."

Later, in our room we'd sing and watch  
The moon rise, calm as a lady's smile.  
Pretending we were orphans or that our mother  
Was a foreign queen.  
(She sent us post-cards with sentences  
That jerked against the page like broken birds.)  
Aunt Laura told my father that I'd turn out  
Like Her...

I told Angela someday  
We'd run away forever.  
We'd live along the river all our lives  
Weaving Queen Anne's Lace to wear;

The summer stars would be our colored jewels and pearls.  
The Lady Moon would soar above our heads,  
Pale wreathed in gold, while the  
Sun would sink and spread like liquid bronze.  
We'd write our mother where we were  
And she'd send her letters there:  
Soft as marsh wrens whistling,  
Strange and wild as swans.

## THE EXECUTION

Things slide into place with inevitable ease.  
Heavy lines in a well plotted mystery.

## NIGHT VISION

It works, the down and across of it  
Fits like the puzzle of a crossword puzzle.  
The convolutions, the turns and twists  
The calm theme like a symphony's  
Extending, returning: a balance  
Like a dress, like a room, like a plan  
Like a well-laid plan  
(There are time constraints to keep.)

See how pieces fit  
How it glides to conclusion

Signs fragments winking  
They know all along, the

Logic, the cyclical applications  
Woven with a sense of style,  
A sense of completion.

Such a well planned design  
So neatly executed.

## THE EXECUTION

Things slide into place with inevitability.  
Story lines in a well plotted mystery,

It works, the down and across of it  
Fits like the jumble of a crossword puzzle.

The convolutions,  
The main theme like a symphony's  
Returning, returning

Like a dream  
Like a well-layed plan  
(There are time schedules to keep.)

See how pieces fit  
How it glides to conclusion

Jigsaw fragments winking  
They knew all along, the

Logic, the mystical applications  
Woven with a sense of style,  
A sense of completion.

Such a well planned design.  
So neatly executed.

## THE STRANGER MIDDLE

## OMEN

This, they said, is trickery here.

Warnings like the lighthouse flicker,

The oars have vanished in the sea.

Figures plunging from a tower--limbs

Revolving gracelessly. in darkness.

Cups overturn and robed men

Mourn in scarlet. in past morning.

This is the corner not yet turned aside.

Somewhere a betrayal. on far, while

A shadow strides toward mountains.

Silent ladies watch from windows.

Ten silver swords in darkness. in

He got his answers

His mother's heart splintered on sand.

His father's name echoing in water.

His own eyes.

## THE STRANGER RIDDLE

This, they said, is trickery here.  
Not the friend's betrayal  
Or the twist of fate against you.  
These are words  
Slippery as fish gliding in darkness.  
Or dreams  
That keep you sleeping past morning.  
This is the snake swallowing its tail.  
Whose face do you search for, while  
Probing this betrayal?  
Ask Oedipus the riddle-solver.  
When he asked who shaped his destiny,  
He got his answer:  
His mother's heart splintered on sand.  
His father's name echoing in water.  
His own eyes.

## ABYSS

At first you thought  
It would be sweet  
And sharp  
Like the snap of bone.  
An ivory symmetry  
In brittle shards.  
Someone has wrapped this edge in cotton wool.  
Muted echoes trick the ear.  
Searching for tunnels through  
Or just the walls to feel  
Fingers scrape on nothing.  
The body sprawls and softly tumbles,  
Free fall.  
As the mind  
Splinters.

## NEUTRON STAR

If there were smoke  
It could be a warning.  
Pressure building toward eruption.  
A wound reflected in the gaping sky  
The smell of sulphur.  
Like scales tipping, a wild swinging  
Toward balance.  
A readjustment of realities of  
Matter.  
A conversion.  
Here instead, is a folded eye  
Like a sealed container.  
The hush of sleep without dreaming.  
The long drop:        Here is gravity  
Gone cannibal.  
A dark drain sweeping up the orphaned stars.  
The final jewel.



## GYPSY PROPHECY

Rain dissolves the quiet stars  
The night will trace its destiny,  
Images of tarot cards.

Tides murmur to salty bars  
Keeping count of history  
Rain dissolves the quiet stars.

The sky is rent to jagged shards  
Fog smothered lines drawn heavily  
Images of tarot cards.

Comets wander, abandoned cars  
Through veiled ranged infinity  
Rain dissolves the quiet stars.

Watch how the dream of future chars  
In rain-soaked pyres of misery  
Images of tarot cards.

How the fading colors mar  
The darkening malignity  
Rain dissolves the quiet stars  
Images of tarot cards.

## ORACLE

Here, darkness remains  
Where nothing stirs.  
A mason jar  
Stretched tight and sealed.  
Here, in this black crow day  
The sun rising, casts no shadow.  
The mind traveling, does not return.  
Fingers must betray  
Hands to slipping hands like rain  
Ungraspable.  
As if nothingness were pain.  
Here, nothing stirs, while the darkness  
Mad as a raven's eye,  
Remains.

## MIRROR

This chalky heart  
A stone on which she hears  
Horse's hooves repeating into distance.

Time heals.

Shadows lengthen into dreams  
Of fountains.

She wakes at seven while strangers in the bedrooms  
Sleep all morning.

Wears her mother's jewelry to the market.

At night there is a dream:

Stone ruins in water.

Searching she cannot find the thing reflected.

All about she hears them saying:

"We don't believe you."

## HOMECOMING

The ceiling warps, the shingles  
Peel away.  
You are here again, tracing your name  
Upon the dust. Remembering  
This crunch of glass under-foot  
This bending light.  
A window you cannot trust.  
Walls blow apart, soft as milkweed  
A shadow follows you down the hall  
And now you are reaching for a door.  
Someone pinching your elbow.  
A wailing child behind the mirror.  
A spreading stain.

THE NIGHT OF THEIR KISS

was not giving it further by

it was not giving it further by

it was not giving it further by

it was not giving it further by

it was not giving it further by

LADIES OF THE FAMILY

it was not giving it further by

it was not giving it further by

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## THE NIGHT OF FIRST COLD

My mother is driving the car

She never drove

She is pale

The flesh peels off the first year underground

She drives looking backwards at my father. He is scowling

He would not get in

She tries to reassure me

I see that she is frightened

"Do you know that you are dead?" I ask

Her face reflects upon the windshield

She is watching the rear view mirror

She never loved him

Turning to me she says: "He is not your father"

This relieves me

I ask: Does this mean you are back to stay?

My hands have gone translucent.

## TWO ORPHANS CONVERSE

Once upon a time  
 I planned to run away to Marakkesh  
 Or live beside the seashore.

You were born outside Pittsburgh  
You came to the city when your father died

Behind the house there was a field of milkweed  
 Humming symphonies.  
 I dreamt of beaches warm as flesh  
 And infinite.  
 Of camel rides in Pakistan  
 And hothouse flowers growing wild.

When we met you looked gray as brickwork  
Moored and gaunt among the tenements  
Buses crossed the bridge to Williamsburg  
You washed dishes, folded laundry  
Watched neon signs blink uptown.

I would have sailed to Italy  
 And passed through Europe gypsy-fashion  
 My skin sand-golden.

From the bridge I watch the barges drift upon  
The greasy river where catfish float and  
Seagulls feast on garbage.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania I dream of China.  
 I dream I dance to silver flutes in royal gardens  
 I wear silk the pattern of April water  
 Coral bracelets, rings of jade.  
 Long ago in Pennsylvania my mother played the harp  
 Her fingers, ivory.  
 I sang soprano in the children's choir.

Outside the city dims and dwindles  
You say you dreamed of mermaids once  
Smiling at you from the sea--  
Mother, there are shark nets in the harbor  
Oil slicks rot the shoreline  
I hear whispering underwater.

You were such a silent child.  
 When you were born you didn't want to cry.  
 The doctor had to slap and slap.

## GRANDMOTHER

## I THE PHOTOGRAPH

You stare out, lips  
Pressed tight together.  
An infant folded against your chest  
Little accordion  
You watch the camera  
Sombre as a funeral.

## II THE MEMORY

Now the children crouch in the kitchen  
While you are shredding photos in the parlor, saying:  
" This was my husband and his sister  
Before we moved from Brooklyn.  
This was me outside the old house on Flatbush.  
At six I played Beethoven so well they called  
The neighbors in. I remember how Miss Feinman  
Pressed my fingers to the keys so hard I cried.  
We had to sell the piano years ago.  
That was my husband Nathan who went away  
And strangers in the kitchen who stare so queerly."



## UNDERTOW

It begins this way: First  
Sliding down the sheets,  
The grappling.  
These are tunnels where  
You don't see endings.  
You can't see  
What is done,  
Or the hands that do it.  
Only the sound of breathing  
The friction between the legs.  
The movement.  
You are stretched like a hide  
For tanning. First you  
Are entered. And then there is nothing  
Left when it is  
Finished. Except for the emptying out  
That comes later.  
The fruits.  
I mean the dividends.  
I mean the people staring as you are  
Waddling down the streets.  
You are laid still as a lidless eye--  
Stretched dry. And then you swell up.  
Your body is like a balloon you must be  
Careful of.

This lump that is growing inside of you.

Pushing your insides out of the way

Kicking all night.

You must lie knees apart

Your joints creak as you walk.

Your body panics.

Forgetting how to work

It rebels.

Your belly swells and then bursts.

You were just a husk

To be split apart.

To be slit open.

## SUMMER COMES

## LOVERS MEETINGS

Clutched together till  
Sinews tore and bones  
Cracked open.

He squeezed me till I thought  
I'd split wide.

Locked.

Locked like wapiti at spring thaw  
Horns wedged, lovers forever  
To starve, coupled together.

Too tight to breathe

I heard my ribs buckling.

Heads gripped--splinter of bone  
On bone.

And the doe has fled.

I chose to break toward mountains

Upward past the snow line  
Back to winter.

I heard his voice reach behind me

Back, back the doe has fled

The silence in frozen canyons beckoning  
Toward winter.

## FAIRY TALE

I keep the house neat  
You shine the shoes.  
I wash the dishes  
We keep our things in twos.

I keep the house neat  
You watch the budget.  
We are married  
Once we were in love  
Clang, clang, clang went the trolley  
We had a favorite song.

I keep the house neat  
We raise children, we garden too.  
You brought me flowers one day  
Then you proposed and I  
Accepted--we were in love  
And that's what people do:  
They fall in love.  
They fall off ladders.

I keep the house neat  
You wash the windows.  
I make the lunches:  
Sandwiches and Campbells.  
I empty ashtrays.  
You track in the mud.

I keep the house neat  
You drink at the office  
And your breath smells mornings.  
You snore all night.  
That's all you do,  
And I don't want you  
Either.

You never clean the bathtub ring  
And you always slam the doors.  
I rearrange the cabinets  
You cheat on me with whores.  
When you're not home, I play the radio  
Loud. I paint my nails turquoise or  
Throw the silverware away, instead of in  
The sink.  
"They just disappear!" I say.

I keep the house neat  
The house apart from you.  
You shine the shoes.  
We fell in love once upon a time  
Like fairy tales.  
It was lies and lies.  
You didn't know but I remember  
How I cried that first night  
At Niagara, when you were done  
With me and sleeping.

## QUICKSAND

Stranger in the desert  
Stumbling past strange shapes of sand,  
These restless dunes, unwavering so swiftly  
You never see

## JOURNEYS

(Perhaps at night when you are sleeping)  
They rearrange and twist away from you  
Leaving nothing to remember  
Neither pearls frozen in moonlight,  
Nor hollows in shadow.  
And you search and watch pilgrims  
Now stretched before you like a sleepwalker  
Or an innocent to a growing city  
Leaves and charts lost behind you  
See sink and sink--leave this place marked  
A stone that holds no story.  
Who will know you're gone?  
Who will go out looking?

## QUICKSAND

Stranger in the desert  
Stumbling past strange shapes of sand.  
These restless dunes, unraveling so swiftly  
You never see  
(Perhaps at night while you are sleeping)  
They rearrange and twist away from you  
Leaving nothing to remember:  
Neither peaks frozen in moonlight,  
Nor hollows in shadow.  
How you search and search pilgrim  
Arms stretched before you like a sleepwalker  
Or an immigrant to a crumbling city  
Lantern and charts lost behind you  
You sink and sink--leave this place unmarked  
A sieve that holds no story.  
Who will know you're gone?  
Who will go out looking?

## WHAT YOU HEARD

Far off

A voice crying.

The buzzing in an ear.

Your name spoken in a foreign tongue.

Hunting for this image in the thinning river

You knelt and stars tattooed patterns at your back

The moon stared blankly from the water

A dolphin split the surface

Leaping.

Somewhere a child is lost

And wandering.

All night you toss and toss.

Dream yourself a hero

Paused mutely before crossroads

Cheosing.



## THE DESERT

Dryness cracks the shells

Sand stirs in memories of tide

There is only silence against an echo of the sky.

Who will find what is lost and made empty?

Observe my hands.

All day I wait for sleep.

All night I hear the sounding of the sea in shells.

Rock formations twist like the tunnels of an ear.

The salty promised smell.

## IN THE ABSENCE OF A CONCH SHELL

for Jeff

The night empties as summer dips southward  
Voices disperse like waves breaking on water  
Memory dams and dries to shadowed dunes  
To a thin whistling in ragged shells.  
I grow gnarled as driftwood.

If outside there was rain drumming  
Or if I were on a nighttime train  
Throbbing past pools of darkness  
If I were swimming into sleep or  
Talking on the phone long distance  
If someone called.

The moon grows phase by phase, a new season.  
I have barely come and wish it was time for going.  
Time to unveil what will finally happen  
Not step by step but in a rush of wind and shouting.

In that loud silence where tides of stillness  
Beat upon the ear and colors blend to patterns of wizardry  
Like the way one feels hearing the crash of symphonies.

A friend taught me how to listen to radio static:  
By adjusting the volume properly,  
You can tune in a sound of waves,  
You can conjure up the sea.

## CERBERUS SPEAKS OF WATER

The land lies flat beneath her spiral

Flat as the swampland along my Styx.

The plane refuels as she sits

Strapped in and thinking

How the asphalt rose to meet her like

An unmarked tombstone.

One might say:

She travels to a purpose.

Looking backward (one might add)

Like Ulysses underground

Greeting dead comrades and meeting those

He had not planned to find.

She sees familiar faces spin below her

Blank as blank horizons.

She sees nothing in the distance

Her choices drift and sink in water

As weeds rustle along the concrete edge she recalls

Reedy hands lost along the way

(The chant of slipping fingers)

Would you say: "She's haunted by the past."

I say: There is a river that she may not cross.

## DARKNESS AT THE BOTTOM

Seabirds swoop behind us crying  
In the froth they find their dinner.  
Some say they bring sailing men luck.  
I think that they are garbage eaters  
And I put my trust in constellations

In charts and not cross currents.  
Stars do not reflect in water,  
The depths are black beneath us  
Looking in, one sees nothing.

We are sailors here, we do not swim.  
We are searching for safe channels.  
Our sails unfurl to cup the wind and carry us  
The fathoms lie below us, waiting.

We do not ride the currents  
They lead to whirlpools  
The rip-tide, the undertow.  
My sailors fear the serpents

Of old tales, they fear the water's edge  
Where we'd tip and slide to oblivion.  
I do not fear that

It's the sea  
That carries us above it.  
Down deep its insides churn and  
Send up carcasses of whales  
The gulls pick at their eyes,  
They have no eyes.  
There are mountain peaks down there,  
The tops you never see.  
You cannot see your face reflected.  
It lies beneath me black, black.  
I ride it and my eyes  
In the mirror are black.  
And I do not know my face.

## AT THE MIRROR HOUSE

It was that the choice was so difficult, and so  
Unexpected. First I didn't want to see;  
It made me dizzy watching all the rippling  
Faces staring back at me.

What with the warping, the disguise of  
Mine among the others.  
It wasn't fair--

I had to decide without  
The proper evidence.  
And what if I was wrong?

Would I have to continue on  
With my mistake?  
And who would have my face instead?  
(If I could not remember well  
Enough to choose the same again.)

I must have stood there hours  
Trying to recall  
A geography of wrinkles or an eyelash curl.

Nothing gave it away.  
After a while they seemed  
All the same.  
Each smiling crookedly  
In unison.

## DIDO'S LAMENT

He came the morning after the hurricane  
Crawling from his broken masts to my table.  
He has come from a shipwrecked city  
Left burning in the night of celebration  
When he told his stories we nodded our heads sadly.  
He bore his father with him, the woman left behind.

So we bade him welcome, we fed him at  
The royal table. He drank from my goblet.  
My people looked upon these men with favor  
And I, a Queen and noble lady, bade this exile  
Journey's rest in my fair city.

So this betrayer, this man Aeneas  
Conspired against me, how had I wronged him?  
A storm swept the royal hunt to ruin  
And in a cave he took me, but I will not speak of that,  
Nor of the nights that followed in my chamber  
With the people whispering in the streets of the city.

And while I lay blinded, my sisters all around me  
Nodding, gossiping about husbands, clucking at their queen  
He was building ships and thinking of divine promises

Thinking how to father cities instead of children  
This sailor left one morning with the sun  
Burning in the flooding of my misery. We have  
Built a fire cursing that he may look upon as he departs,  
This strange man who flees continually  
These funeral pyres.

## THE GIFT-BRINGER

His eyes are very clear and cold  
But then he's from this windy country  
Where snow folds

The sleepy families  
And freezes flowers into ice  
(Like jewels) Now he lives upon the sea.

He visits once or twice a year  
I don't mind.  
Mostly I stay home and watch the northern lights

And sweep the kitchen clean. Time  
Passes easily. There's nothing much to do  
The sheets are always pressed and the silver shines.

I wander through  
The muddy streets to the harbor.  
The water is blue

In fair weather and gray  
If it will storm. He may drown  
Someday

Or he may not come back at all, this town  
Is small and dull I know  
With brown

Streets and dirty windows.  
I don't know why he stays  
As long as he does for visits when he could go

To China or to Spain, where days  
Are long and sunny.  
Where it is always

Summer. It is mostly winter here.  
We shiver in our sleep  
The days pass dreary

As the nights and our lifetimes creep  
Along as slow as snails.  
He only comes once or twice a year

To have the sails  
Mended and to resupply.  
Last time he brought a bale

Of linen. I dyed  
It magenta and made a nightgown  
Trimmed with lace.  
And he was gone by  
Morning.



— — #36 The Story of  
 — — Prince Chi in  
 — — the Court of  
 — — Chou Hsin  
 — —

PRINCE CHI

In my father's time  
 The people barred the city's gates  
 Fearing dragons.  
 Now I live in court.  
 The young girls rustle by in silk.  
 Our fierce serpents are gold embroidery  
 Upon their elbows.  
 What have we here, to be afraid?

I stand upon the watchtower  
 Gazing east.  
 Through gilt halls my emperor rages  
 Scattering courtiers like chaff behind him.  
 Last week he executed Li Minh for treason.

The courtesans whisper in the doorways.  
 Even the Lady Chou is not above suspicion.  
 I climb the stairs to watch how cranes are  
 Fleeing southward.  
 And wear my hair  
 Unbound.

## JOURNEY TO THE NORTHERN KINGDOM

Border dream to Canada.

This is a song of still travel

A childhood of sitting by the window

Bent against the darkness of a photograph.

See the child by the border looking back,

The years disappear and the miles gallop past

The compass in the child's face points north.

North, stranger, where I left you last.

The winds howl in memory, memory turns to winter

Dream to Canada and a dream crinkled yellow

Darkened by years, by steps toward the abyss

Come north child, you were promised.

Years ago the path was charted.

## THE VAMPIRE

The quiet is interrupted by frantic  
Conversations of insects. Trees  
Curl inward by slow degrees  
And night descends apologetic

For its opacity, not meant  
To be alarming, rather a reality  
Of bland cycles to be  
A comfort, a palliative sweetly lent

To ones who comfortably know  
Nothing of the powers of cold  
Malignity. Summers here fold  
Into Spring. I hear the snow

Comes only once or twice.  
And I who saw my summers fade  
Stillborn, am puzzled by such promises made  
By gentle hints of paradise.

## CROSSWORD

Abroad a crossword puzzle

The patched land under the jet route lines

The highway maze: black questions and white replies

A calligraphy of traveler's tales.

Home was last weeks challenge, the ink filled in.

23 down was a friend now cycling in Providence.

45 across is a long awaited letter.

The long quotation (50 across and 17 down) is

The future ending place.

4 across is your name. (Can you remember?)

7 down is where you thought you were going.

(Before you knew better)